

**Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (A)**

**Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

**Trinity Church, July 3, 2011**

I admit that I was captivated by the verse that opens the Gospel lesson. Jesus says: “To what shall I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“We played the flute, and you did not dance;  
We wailed and you did not mourn.”

I tried to find where that neat little verse came from. It sounds like the children’s teasing games that they play in all cultures, or maybe it was some familiar folk-saying. Most bible versions print it indented as a poem. In Jesus’ native language it is an elegant two-line verse, but so far as I could find out, it is Jesus’ own unique invention. That literary pursuit was just a personal diversion, but suddenly in the light of immediate and urgent circumstances, the lines took on a new and powerful meaning.

Against the stormy background that overshadows our national holiday, and especially here in Minnesota, Jesus’ haunting words take on a grim and prophetic significance. What can we say of this generation? We are like children sitting in the marketplace, calling to one another, “We played the tune and you didn’t dance.” If we can’t play the game, it’s all your fault.” Children behave that way. Reasonable adults do not. Pin your label where you will. You can’t miss.

Jesus’ own application of the word-play was wistfully personal: John came fasting and you said he was crazy. I came eating and drinking and they called me a drunkard. It’s a no-win situation. The Jesus of the Gospels is never resentful, but every now and then he shows frustration because people, even his closest followers, just don’t seem to get it. But Jesus is patient. In the course of time the outcomes will prove the truth. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. The light still shines in the darkness.

But that’s not what the sermon was supposed to be about. I begin with an experience that June and I shared just a couple of weeks ago. We went to the concert by the All-State Lutheran Choir over at Calvary Church. I was tired and didn’t much want to go; but “She Who Must Be Obeyed” prevailed. To my stunned surprise, the experience was soul-stirring --absolutely overwhelming. The musical works were challenging and the production was superb in every

category of choral performance, without making any allowance for teen-age voices or for the fact that they had been in rehearsal for less than a month.

What gave the performance its glow, its positive spiritual energy, was the larger experience out of which it emerged. The choir is a youth activity of the ELCA in Minnesota. It is a specifically Christian religious activity, specifically Lutheran, and focused around challenging choral music. The energy was positively electric. At the intermission, the director explained the origins and purposes of the All-State Lutheran Choir program and his own Christian motivation as Director. He said something that I jotted down on the back of my program. He said, "I challenge them to dare to be the person they want to be."

To dare to be the person you want to be: That Christian challenge, to grow in wisdom and stature, is as important and difficult to me, nearing the end of life, as it will be to those teen-agers at the beginning of theirs. It is as important to you, and just as hard. I know, and you do too, how many traps there are along the way, how many failures. That splendid music director and youth leader had to know what a stern challenge he was issuing, necessary as it is to the formation of a Christian, Christ-like character. Jesus says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light. He also said, "Take up your cross."

Take St. Paul, the Second Lesson this morning. As Father Schulenberg said in his sermon last week, the Letter to the Romans is widely accepted as the Great Apostle's most mature thought. But if it is Paul's "most mature thought," look where his maturity has brought him! "Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?" That is not a token or rhetorical humility. The entire passage -- the part we heard last week and the part we read today -- the whole thing is deeply, cruelly, wrenchingly personal. Paul was used to physical pain and hardship. Those self-revealing words do not erupt out of physical pain. Their agony betrays a personal struggle that is profoundly moral. "I do the very thing I hate. ... I can **will** what is right, but I cannot **do** what is right."

What is that if not a sign that Paul is as deeply human as you and? We don't know what Paul's burden was except that he knew it was a moral failure -- that it was sin, by whatever name it might be called. It is the human condition.

Is there anyone of mature age who thinks only of good things in the dark hours of the night? Who never lies awake regretting the self-serving words or deeds, the subtle shaving of the truth, the irretrievable moment when something was done or said that was nearly beyond the realm of forgiveness? I suppose that there are

some who are so comfortable with themselves, who have been so successful in burying the ugly things, that they have not lived through the experience of “wretchedness” – the ache of isolation or some desert-wandering of the spirit. If that’s the case, they must have missed something vitally important about being human.

All of that is the hard and heavy yoke. The Christian way is different. It is easier and it is harder. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Christ says, “I don’t want your penitential religious labor, I don’t want your money, I don’t want your time. I don’t want these bits and pieces of you. I want YOU. I want ALL of you. Hand over all of that unruly self and I will give you a new self to take its place. I give you myself, utterly, wholly, and your willful will, will become mine.

In the end, the only bridge over the chasm between what we are and what we dare to be is what the *Message Bible* calls “the unforced rhythms of grace.” Here is the passage:

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out with religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.*

That is one reason why we worship, maybe even the only reason: to look into the face of Jesus the Christ. And when we look at him, as we do at our altar or at any other place, when you look at him, he will look at you. And when he looks at you, you will walk in his light. In spite of the cracks and creaks of our bodies, the sluggishness of our minds or the reluctance of our souls, we will sing and dance and rejoice in the Lord.